

Facts for Consumers

Sunscreens
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Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Office of Consumer & Business Education
(877) FTC-HELP www.ftc.gov

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TRUE OR FALSE?

Sunscreens labeled 15 and higher don't protect you against all the sun's rays.

☐ True ☐ False

Suntans are a sign of skin damage.

☐ True ☐ False

Sunscreens should be used on cloudy days.

☐ True ☐ False

Infants shouldn't be in the sun at all.

☐ True ☐ False

Some medications can make your skin sensitive to the sun.

☐ True ☐ False

All are true.

Overexposure to the sun's invisible rays — ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) — can cause skin damage. The damage can be immediate as well as long-term, with effects ranging from sunburn, rashes, and cell and tissue damage to premature wrinkling and skin cancer. Indeed, many skin changes that often are identified with aging actually result from skin damaged by too much sun.

Any tan is a sign of skin damage. Tanning occurs when the skin produces additional pigment (coloring) to protect itself against sunburn from ultraviolet rays. Indoor tanning devices also give off ultraviolet rays that can be as harmful as those from the sun.

To help reduce your risk of skin damage from sunlight, try to minimize your exposure between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. That's when the sun's rays are strongest. And remember that skin damage doesn't occur only on the beach or ski slopes. The fact is that even casual exposure to sunlight — driving a car, walking to the store, taking an outdoor lunch break — contributes to cumulative lifetime exposure. If you're out during the peak hours, wear a hat and tightly-woven clothing that covers your body, and use maximum protection sunscreens. Sunscreens can help protect your skin from the sun's harmful rays — but only if you use them right.

Sunscreen Protection

Most people benefit from sunscreens with sun protection factor (SPF) numbers of 15 or more. The SPF number gives you some idea of how long you can stay in the sun without burning. For example, if you normally burn in 10 minutes without sunscreen and you've applied a liberal dose with a SPF number of 15, you should be protected from sunburn for 150 minutes. Sunscreens with SPF numbers higher than 15 may work better for people who are fair-skinned, live at high altitudes, work or play outdoors much of the day, or perspire heavily. Swimming and perspiration reduce the actual SPF value of many sunscreens — even those that are water-resistant — so you have to reapply the product often.

Although sunscreens with identical SPF numbers give you equivalent sunburn protection from UVB rays, no sunscreen product screens out all UVA rays. Some may advertise UVA protection, but there is no system to rate UVA protection yet.

Many sunscreens — even those with the same SPF numbers — have different ingredients or different combinations of the same ingredients. Because some people experience allergic reactions to various sunscreen ingredients, it's a good idea to test a product first by applying a small amount to a limited area of your skin. To get the maximum protection from your sunscreen, apply at least one large handful about 30 minutes before you go outside, and reapply after swimming, toweling dry, or participating in any vigorous activity that causes heavy perspiration.

If you're taking medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist if your medications will make your skin sensitive to the sun or aggravate sunburn or rashes. Certain antibiotics, birth control pills, diuretics, antihistamines, and antidepressants are among the commonly used drugs that can increase sensitivity to the sun's rays.

Special Precautions For Children

Experts estimate that a significant percentage of our exposure to sun occurs by age 18. That's why it's especially important to apply sunscreens with a minimum SPF of 15 to children's skin about 30 minutes before they go outdoors. Reapply sun-

screens after they swim, towel off, or play hard. Talk with teachers, child care providers, and camp counselors about scheduling outdoor activities to reduce children's exposure to the midday sun.

Infants six months and younger should be kept out of direct sunlight altogether. Sunscreens may irritate baby skin, and infants' developing eyes are particularly vulnerable to sunlight.

For More Information

For information about skin damage or skin cancer contact your family doctor, dermatologist, or:

Cancer Information Service
1-800-4-CANCER

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345

American Academy of Dermatology
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Schaumburg, IL 60168-4014
www.aad.org

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